

STEP BY STEP

By WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN



It was tough going for Ollie Dane, recent F. B. I. grad, when his skeptical townsmen scoffed at modern police methods!

COUNTY DETECTIVE OLIVER DANE frowned when he saw how sticky the going was. Not that his battered old Chevvie couldn't make it, even if mostly sideways.

But he knew those others were already there before him, and his mind was working ahead of his body, and he was worried. The sheriff and the coroner were country folk, Vermonters like himself. To them, mud was mud. To Ollie Dane, recently graduated from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's police school in Washington, mud was no longer mud, but was a swell chance to get some moulages of the murderer's footprints. Or tire prints, if he'd driven a car.

"Better come out here, Ollie," Sheriff

Elder had said, over the telephone. "Arnie Slosson's been murdered. Some geezer just about blew Arnie's head off from outside the window."

Right then, the clipped phrases of command had all but leapt from Ollie's lips to tumble over the wire from Headquarters to the sheriff at Slosson's farm. But he'd remembered the peculiar attitude of his fellow lawmen since he'd come back from the F.B.I. course.

"Darned if they aren't resentful," Ollie thought again, as he spun the steering-wheel to straighten the Chevvie out of a sideslip. "Heck, it was their idea! Maybe I shouldn't have bought the clothes."

He sighed as he meditated wryly on the

vagaries of human motivation. A lowly town constable when the war had broken out, Ollie had swapped his constable's uniform—a blue shirt and a visored hat to try and lend an official touch to his own pants and his star—for G.I. garb. He'd put in four years with the MPs, and when he'd come back a grateful town had appointed him County Detective, arranged for the F.B.I. course, and cheered him when he'd gone to Washington.

They'd met him when he'd come back, ready to cheer again. The sheriff. The coroner. His brother, Jim. His best girl, Martha Lake. His worst rival, Kitch Hardin. And Sheriff Elder's deputy, fresh, red-headed, freckled Bud Lake, Martha's kid brother.

Ollie had saved his money in the Army, and in Washington he'd been able to get a couple of decent suits of clothes and a better-than-fair hat. His shoes and shirt and tie matched the deal. Nothing gaudy or even expensive. Just civvies.

They all had looked past the dapper, brisk-striding young man with the several cases of mysterious-looking luggage. All but Martha. Martha had smiled in her dark, flashing way, and said, "Hi, Handsome! Your disguise has your pals fooled."

Ollie had laughed his delight, until he'd caught the sudden closing of the faces of those others. Only Bud Lake had laughed, and he'd made a wisecrack. "Was that a police school or a tailor's school you went to, Hawkshaw?"

Sheriff Elder's greeting had been, "Hmmm, had yourself a good time, eh, Ollie? Oh, well, we're only young once. I don't suppose you are too keen on getting started right off, but we are sort of anxious. Got to try and justify all the expense the county has been to. Well, come along, now."

Ollie had felt like a criminal, instead of like an alert young detective. He had tried to

reason what was wrong, and slowly it had come to him.

The Ollie Dane they were all being nice to was the pinched, anxious-eyed young constable who had gone off to war and come back with some meat on him. But a G.I. It was fashionable to be nice to G.I.s. *If* the G.I. looked properly needy, and what G.I. didn't?

But this spring-stepped, businesslike man in the well-cut suit and with the snappy gray hat and the polished black shoes looked about as needy as Joe Louis getting a client ready for the convincer.

"Guess I picked the wrong line of business," had been Kitch Hardin's unpleasant but affably spoken greeting. "Hardware is okay, but the public servants seem to get all the gravy. The taxpayers are doing better by you now, aren't they, Ollie?"

"You're sorta late," Ollie had drawled, "but I judge the Army will start you off in my footsteps if you beg hard enough. And let me thank you for coming to meet me. I didn't know you cared."

"I didn't come to meet you. I have a date with Marty for the movies, and we are late now," Kitch snapped defensively.

Coroner Boskins chuckled until his paunches jellied up and down, and Sheriff Elder, Ollie's boss, permitted himself a wry grin of amusement. But Lake, who was impartial in his baiting of his sister's beaux, assumed a gloating expression at Hardin's discomfort even as he cast a shrewd eye at Ollie's square-shaped luggage.

"What's that, Hawkshaw? False mustaches, magnifying glasses, and the addresses of a lot of good bloodhounds? Boy, you look more like a pitchman for a carnival than a county dick!"

"Aw, shut up," Ollie had blurted, before he remembered Bud was also Martha's brother, as well as his subordinate in the police department. "Heh, heh. Have your

fun, Bud.”

“Not just yet awhile,” the freckled youth had chuckled. “I won’t really have fun until you open up your kit and go into your act, Hawkshaw.”

BUT “anxious” as Sheriff Elder said he was to make use of Ollie’s training, nothing ever came up that was quite down Ollie’s alley, it seemed.

Some of the cases Ollie got to know about through the newspapers. Others, he learned about long after evidence had been secured, the investigation made, the case closed.

So when the call had come over the many-eared party-line to Headquarters from Arnie Slosson’s farm, Ollie was aware of a tension that was more than ordinary.

“What the heck, why don’t I relax?” he growled to himself, as he angled down the country road that led to the farm. “You’d think the F.B.I. was on trial, or something, the way I am tightened up and nervous! Heck, this is just a murder case, and the stuff I learned should relax me, make me easy with assurance I am going to handle it right.”

Nevertheless, he had swallowed his instinctive command to Sheriff Elder, “Don’t let anyone track up the ground outside the window, Sheriff!” And now he was almost dreading the moment when he’d see that red-haired, snub-nosed, bright-button-eyed brother of Marty’s.

“Well, Kitch Hardin won’t be there, anyway,” he consoled himself. “Heck, aren’t these my friends—the sheriff and the coroner and Bud! They *want* to see me make good!”

But he had to admit, as he slowed for the muddy turn into the Slosson lane, that there was a better chance of finding perfect conditions, for his trained work at the murder scene than there was for his consoling thought to be true.

If he’d had any real doubts about the condition of the ground outside the death window, they were banished when he slowed to a stop near the other two cars and saw the trampled ground all around the house.

Elder, Boskins and Bud Lake were laconic in their greetings, even for Vermonters they were laconic. The sheriff did the greeting. The other two just stared.

“Unh,” said the sheriff.

Ollie stopped by the steps to regard the ground ruefully. “Looks like the Eighth Army killed him,” he observed acidly. “Rolled up in their tanks, then charged.” He sighted an eye critically on a blackened rent in the weatherboard farmhouse. “Or the Army just surrounded him, and the Air Forces got the victim with a bomb.”

“He means we tracked up the place,” Coroner Boskins said to the sheriff. “You tell him that was you ‘n Bud ‘n the neighbor who discovered Arnie. Anyway, I’m too old to go cat-footing around just because someone wants to play detective.”

Elder scratched his jaw and looked at Ollie, his glasses flatting in the sunlight.

“I ain’t all that bad, Ollie. We naturally looked around a bit. But the boot marks, we left. I’m no J. Edgar Hoover; but I have mebbe a lick of sense. Want to have a look-see before we start sweating, Ollie? Arnie is in the room that was struck by lightning.”

Bud licked his lips. “Won’t the bloodhounds suffocate in the back of your Chevvie with the trunk closed, Hawkshaw?”

“Shut up, Bud,” Elder said patiently. “There’s two people a murder isn’t funny to: the victim and the police. Make out you are a policeman now, Bud, and not just Martha’s kid brother. This way, Ollie.”

Ollie grinned his appreciation. As he passed Bud, he sniffed. “HmMMMM. I detect a strong odor, and I cannot say it is a strange one!”

“Save your breath, Hawkshaw!” Bud

growled. "It'll go out of you fast enough when you see Arnie Slosson."

It was pretty messy.

The murdered man had been sitting over some food, eating, his back to the window of the large farm kitchen—the usual combined kitchen-dining room that farms have to accommodate crop-workers at harvest time.

The wreckage of a kerosene lamp added to the litter of the table, and the table-top, cloth, and faded, cheap linoleum floor-covering had all burned. The dead man, his face down in the plates, had burned considerably, too. The place still reeked of acrid fumes, the nauseating odor of burned flesh, and the unmistakable stench of burned hair. Lots of burned hair.

Ollie swiveled his attention around at everything, finally pausing on a savage rent in the wall opposite the window where the murderer had stood, and studying some rubble on the floor against the floor-board. He looked over his shoulder at the rip in the wall of the house and narrowed his eyes in recollection of the previous night. The others watched him.

"About the way the family of a sick man will look at a specialist they don't much trust or care about," Ollie thought, with an inner grin. But now that he was working, he could find it amusing and then push it away into the background. "Hm-m-m-m. Looks like last night's storm sorta saved a little evidence for us, anyway," he said aloud.

He walked to the door of the room, pushed every memory of the room from his mind, focusing on a blue-jay that was bathing in a puddle in the lane, and then turned back to the scene with his eyes blanked for new impressions.

Without touching anything there, he eyed a shelf that was cluttered with bottles of the drug store variety. He looked into the dirty sink, eyed the rusty iron pump-handle that mouthed out over the sink rim, and

wrinkled his nose at a greasy, limp, dish-rag fashioned from white sacking material.

He steeled himself to the duty, then squatted low to peer up at what could be seen of the dead man's face and neck. He shook his head when he straightened.

"That black, Doc? Hair, huh? Beard?"

"O' course," Boskins said. "It's Arnie Slosson. You recollect that cough-drop beard—half-way to his belt, like him and his brother, Sven, wore—and the handlebar mustache? Mean as a blooded bull, Arnie was; and twice as vicious. You ask me who would like to see him dead and you got your Eighth Army again. About that many men had the reason, and the wish, anyway.

"Now, I don't know any more about this than you do, Ollie. Less, I suspect, because a coroner goes by what he examines. And I haven't examined anything yet. Just looked. Sheriff, here, wanted you to be satisfied you hadn't missed anything before I worked on Arnie."

Ollie nodded. "Sure," he said, wishing he wouldn't but knowing he was going to say it anyway. "Well—I guess you'll find he died a bit before eleven last night; that he was eating fish-roe and tomatoes, fried; and that he suffered from indigestion."

Boskins' hairless eyebrows moved up and down and stilled again. Bud Lake couldn't think of anything to say, apparently, so he grinned and picked his nose. Sheriff Elder gnawed at his lower lip with yellowed teeth.

"Look, Ollie, if there's any fancy stuff you aim to do afore the Doc goes to work . . . I mean, let's get on with it."

Ollie nodded, feeling a slight elation that he had given them something more to think about than why didn't he hurry up and do something. The fish-roe and the indigestion were very simple: the unwashed tin-can in the sink, the medicine on the shelf.

The eleven o'clock limit to the man's

life was, as yet, his own secret. He nodded his satisfaction that he had all his impressions memorized. Then he blanked his mind once more, got out his notebook and pencil, and made some rapid notes.

"Sheriff," he said, "I'll want you to take some pictures of the room, and then get to work outside."

The sheriff looked slightly pleased by Ollie's diplomatic "you to take some pictures." He nodded. "Dust everything for fingerprints, and that, eh? Sure, Ollie. Hop to it. Uh, I guess you'll need help with all that junk you got, hey? Give him a hand, Bud. And no funny stuff, either."

"Kid," Ollie said, as he led the way to the car, "no matter who it is, what it is, murder riles me up. Man has a certain dignity, just as he has a certain span of life. When he is murdered, that dignity has been violated, that span of life shortened with finality. It's as if someone challenged God in his right to—to run things. We aren't letting that challenge go unheeded. Science can help us, and we are going to make use of it. See?"

"Yea, Hawkshaw to the rescue!" Bud chortled.

But his eyes were impressed when he helped Ollie unload his F.B.I. equipment.

THERE were plenty of fingerprints. On the chairs, the table, the fragments of plate. There were fingerprints on a double-barreled shotgun that stood in a hall closet, the barrel clean, the gun loaded.

"Doc?" Ollie asked the coroner. "I'd like to get prints from the body, so we can eliminate those."

"Unh," Boskins grunted. "Well—the wagon is here. I'll take him along and figure you the time of death, and all that. How did you figure the eleven o'clock angle, son?"

Ollie pointed to the wall. "See the wadding from the spread-bore, there? The head condition makes it look like the choke-

bore killed him, the spread-bore took the lamp, started the fire, made that hole in the wall. I recall the bad lightning was about eleven last night. I figure it struck the house, ripped it open; and the terrific downpour put out both fires. The one the lamp started, the one the lightning started. Could be twenty minutes to thirty minutes before. Say, ten-thirty."

Elder said, "Seth Purvis, a neighbor, noticed the rent in the farmhouse, an' it was him coming to investigate why Arnie wasn't doing something about it that led to the discovery. That was early this morning. After the rain had stopped."

"The rain stopped at three," Ollie said. "I know! That danged night plane takes off right over the top of my bedroom, and it woke me at three. Those air-jockeys change the prop-pitch right over my room, and the moan of it woke me."

Boskins blinked. "Your nerves bad? Every morning at three it wakes you?"

"The plane is due out at eleven-ten," Ollie said. "It was late because of the storms, I guess. I'm usually just going to bed then."

"I'm in bed at nine," Boskins said. "What has you up so late?"

"Watchin' Kitch Hardin, on our porch." Bud chuckled. "What time Kitch ain't watchin' him on our porch. Hey, Ollie—you reckon them moo-lages are dry? Them plaster footprints? I still don't see what good they do when you got so many fingerprints."

"The tough job is putting the evidence across to the jury, Bud," Ollie said patiently, "They won't take our word; and they don't like pictures. But a moulage, they can take in their hands and look at, and they can fit the boot that made it—or the shoe—into it, and check the distinguishing marks on the boot and the moulage, both. Cuts, worn heels, patched soles. See?"

"Yeah, I don't," Bud said. "Now, you

want me to help you take up them moolages? Or you want I should bring the buckshot pellets and wadding in to Kitch Hardin right now?"

"Kitch Hardin!" Ollie stared. "Why him?"

"He's our firearms expert on shotguns, Ollie," Elder murmured. "Kitch is right smart in his line. Nothing flashy. Just smart."

"Come on, Bud," Ollie said, tightly. "Let's show you how to remove the moulages."

"Now, Bud!" Ollie said a short time later. "What did I tell you about measuring the prints, the footprints? No two men walk exactly alike, in stride. When we get the man who made these footprints—or whose fingerprints are in that room—or whose gun fired those loads—or who owns those boots with the diamond-pattern that's been somehow cut with a vee on the left sole—we got our killer. Just as an extra check, it will show up that this is his length of stride, see? Not as good as fingerprint whorls, but extra evidence. Measure them, Bud, before we take them up."

"Step by step, you are goin' to hang the guy, huh, Ollie?" Bud grinned. "An' step by step, the killer is farther an' farther away, if he's got a lick of sense."

"He hasn't," Ollie said confidently. "He left too much evidence behind."

When he had everything, he said to Elder, "Thank goodness, the killer was dumb. Plastered his fingerprints on the window, as you can see. Must have had mud on his hands. Then he cut himself on the broken glass. Here. See? We can get blood type from that. Boy, we got everything! Now, I want to talk with Slosson's neighbors."

"Save your time," Elder sighed. "Arnie Slosson, nor Sven, neither, never had no neighbors. They had people lived near 'em, yes. Don't you remember, Ollie, the time

Sven up and married that fat blond waitress in the beanery up to Winooski, an' everyone laughed and said how did she know one from t'other? An' Sven went away to Canada with his wife—the waitress—an' Arnie was so mad everybody laughed again an' said maybe Arnie was to marry her, an' Sven short-circuited him?"

"Oh!" Ollie breathed, his face lighting up. "That was a long time ago. Ten years, maybe? Sure! I wasn't interested in police work then."

"Nor in people getting married," Elder said drily. "They was both the meanest cusses ever, Arnie and Sven. They would shoot down the lane, at night, if they heard anyone. Didn't matter if it was someone trying to call on them. Did all their business away. Never came to town, except that time the two was courtin' the waitress. And Sven married her an' left—it was said she had a place up by Montreal—and Arnie pulled back into his shell again."

"More than ever, huh?" Ollie nodded.

"There isn't any more than most," Elder opined. "He was already the most silent, stand-offish man there was, next to Sven. Howsomedever, no need to talk to the neighbors. I already asked around. I'm surprised Seth Purvis even came to look. Unless it was he was so disappointed the whole shebang didn't burn down, he come to find out why. Well, Bud, here, will guard the gate to keep the curious away, until we can get a few more dep'ties out."

He looked around for Bud Lake, saw him with his stern butted up, and his head under the front porch steps. "What you doin', Bud? You sure have taken to Ollie's work in a rush."

Bud backed out and got up, his face excited and a metal box in his hands. "Look! It's been broke open! Stocks an' bonds an' money an' insurance polices. The lid's been pried up, somehow."

"Omigosh, Bud!" Ollie yelled. "Now

you are getting *your* fingerprints all over it!"

"That," Bud said, waspishly, "is so you can prove to the jury who found the box, see? Heck, I'm being careful. But you got to admit if it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have anything, not even the box. So maybe you can put up with my a few smudges."

Ollie crimsoned, but he was game. "Good work, kid," he said. He didn't add that he had intended returning for just such a search for further evidence, but now was anxious to get what he had to town and work it up. "I missed it."

Sheriff Elder looked at Ollie with a new respect in his eyes. "Can't no one man be the whole force," he said. "If so, I wouldn't need you, either, Ollie. Well, come along."

SEVERAL hours later, Ollie looked up from his sheaf of evidence and blinked his eyes at Sheriff Elder. He looked over his shoulder at a knock on the door, and saw Kitch Hardin standing there looking through the screen-hatching, grinning widely.

Ollie controlled his voice as best he could. "I suppose you found out those death slugs were the same ones Arnie bought from you last month? And that the death shots were fired by Arnie's own gun, although it was oiled and clean when we found it?"

Hardin's pudgy face drooped in disappointment. "Uh, yeah," he said. He stared at them both. "I—didn't know you knew."

"Just wanted expert confirmation," Ollie said airily, despite his worried eyes and his drawn mouth. "Thanks, Kitch. I'll let you know if I can use you again."

"Sure. Ollie," Hardin said. "If I'm not by the store, I'll be over to Martha's. See you, fella." Hardin said.

Elder grinned, and winked meaningly. "Just find something out, that you made that good guess?"

Ollie nodded dejectedly. "When I said the killer I was after was dumb, I sort of got my language mixed up, Chief. I'm the dumb one. The killer is smart. You see, more than the gun that killed Arnie was Arnie's."

Elder pushed his hat back on his forehead. "Eh?"

"The fingerprints are Arnie's, too. All of them! The blood is Arnie's type and count. The moulages fit the boots Arnie was wearing. Perfectly! The vee-cut, size, patch, and all. The length of tread of the steps under the window matches those Arnie made as he went about his chores."

Elder chewed on a small tobacco plug. "Well," he murmured, "Arnie was mean enough so that if he destroyed himself—and he had plenty reason, heaven knows!—he'd have done it this way."

"Suicide is out, Chief," Ollie expostulated. "So either a cold-blooded jokester rigged this up on us, taking his own good time, after Arnie was dead, or some tramp killed Arnie for what was in his strong-box and then worked this boomerang up for us later. What do you think?"

"I think," Elder said, slowly, "a whole lot of people are going to laugh when they hear your high-powered evidence proves the corpse killed himself, despite the fact he couldn't do it. I think you are really up against it, Ollie, my boy. It would be better for you if you hadn't got all this scientific evidence to—to trip you up."

"To make a fool of me," Ollie said bitterly.

"I been called it, with adjectives onto the front end," Elder said, with a shrug. "And will be again. Well, you're my detective. What do we do now?"

"Thanks, Chief," Ollie said gratefully. "Now we have the Canadian authorities locate Sven. He better be home, or have a good alibi."

"The Boston police," Elder corrected him.

“Boston? But you said he had married and moved to Montreal?”

“Had. I was just coming in to tell you, when Kitch came in, so I held it. His wife—the waitress—died. Three years ago, they said. Sven sold out and moved to a farm right outside Boston. They checked up. He was there yesterday afternoon. He was there when the police went around asking. He was seen, at six this morning, coming from the milking shed on his place.

“They told him his brother was dead, and he said, ‘Good,’ and went on with his work. More news, too. Montreal said the cuss didn’t have no beard nor mustache. Same with Boston. He must have shaved them off when he married. Wife didn’t like them, mebbe.”

“That doesn’t follow,” Ollie said. “She must have, or she wouldn’t have married him. It was probably his idea. I wonder why? Hmmm. Boston, eh? That’s where that plane was going, the night plane that takes off through my chandelier! Well, well! I wonder, now, could he have sneaked in here, murdered his brother, framed everything up like he did, and made it back to Boston by plane, to be seen at six and set up his alibi! See, he hated Arnie—”

“The other way around, Arnie hated him. He got the woman.”

Ollie grinned. “Maybe that made him even madder! Sven!” He looked around to make sure Bud Lake wasn’t in the room. “Anyway, if Arnie was the hater, how do you account for the five insurance policies Arnie had taken out in Sven’s favor? In the strong-box?”

“I don’t,” Elder said drily. “You’re my detective. You account for them. And everything else.”

Ollie groaned and pulled the telephone to him to call Northeastern Airlines’ counter at the airport. Elder groaned when Ollie finished with a list of twenty-one names, and started to telephone each at the address

the airline had for them, or to trace the few he didn’t have.

“Men with mustaches,” he said, as he patiently called long distance numbers, asked questions, noted answers, and called more long distance numbers, “are the cause of most of the troubles in this world. If Arnie had kept a dog instead of a mustache, we would get somewhere. A dog scares off prowlers; or identifies a familiar caller by his silence. Now, look, Sheriff—nothing personal in that. I didn’t mean your mustache, see?”

Elder stroked the frayed ends of his wispy lip upholstery. “A man with a mustache will cause you trouble, if you don’t justify all this here expense, Ollie. Washington sure changed you!”

“Well, you’re lucky it wasn’t a Skymaster. The DC-3s carry only twenty-one passengers, Chief.”

His questions were always the same, once he had identified himself. “You were booked on Flight 197 from here to Boston, last night. You made the flight? That’s the way you traveled?” The answers were all the same. “Yes. . . .”

“Now, what, Ollie?” Elder said.

“Trying to place Sven aboard that plane,” he explained. “I can’t because it seems everybody who had passage, rode. And none of them were Sven Slosson, and all of them check up with real names and addresses.”

Passenger Nineteen, however, was different. “Is this Northeastern?” the man asked, suspiciously. “So what?”

“Will you please answer my question?” Ollie prodded. “This is the police. We are trying to trace someone. You kept your seat on 197? Your name is Wilbert Barrow, yes?”

“I came by plane, yes. That’s my name.”

“On 197?” Ollie persisted. “You rode on that plane?”

“Well—no,” came the grudging

admission. "I didn't like the weather. I got talking to a fellow in the washroom, and he—well, he was very anxious to make the flight. He—he paid me my fare. And, uh, a little extra. Now, you won't tell Northeastern, will you? I guess I should have had them make the change."

Ollie balled his fist and pounded the desk in his excitement. "Describe the man! About five-eleven? Slender? Smooth-shaven?"

"No," came the instant reply. "About that tall. But—well, bulky. Heavy-looking. And with a Van Dyke beard. You know, one of those pointed beavers?"

"Mustache, too?" Ollie asked, puzzled.

"No mustache. Just the beard. And it was no phony. It had been raining hard, and he was soaking wet. He was combing out his beard. Really tugging at it, with his comb!"

Ollie cradled the telephone, and then called the airline again. He got the chiseled passenger's seat number on 197, then called the hostess at Boston.

Yes, a Van Dyked man had ridden in that seat. No, he was going to Portland. He booked right on to Portland, as soon as the flight got in. His name was Wilbert Barrow.

Ollie checked that, too. Wilbert Barrow had gone to Portland. Well beyond Boston. He grunted his disappointment, then called Portland, raising his voice to make himself heard above Elder's fuming indignation.

"Just wondered if you sold a ticket to Boston to a man with a Van Dyke beard. Name of Wilbert Barrow?"

No, they hadn't.

"He came in on your early flight from Boston," Ollie persisted. "Will you check and see where he went, if he took the airline bus? *Huh?* He *what?* Now you remember, he was a No Show? You mean, he didn't get on the Portland plane at all? Wow! I thank you very, very much!"

Elder listened to his telling of it, then shrugged. "So what? Sven is smooth-shaven. This man had a Van Dyke. You going to hang him because he didn't get on the plane? Sven is still smooth-shaven! And Wilbert Barrow will swear the man he sold his seat to had an honest-to-goodness Van Dyke. Now where do we go?"

"Boston," Ollie sighed, not daring to meet his chief's eyes. "After the Van Dyke lad. Aw, heck, if I hadn't had this training, we'd just have us an unsolved murder of a guy nobody liked."

"So what have you got now, if not that?" Elder asked sourly. "Except a terrific expense account. Okay, come on, Ollie."

THE VAN DYKE man petered away at the airport. A porter noticed that he had gone into the washroom. Nobody had seen him after that.

The Boston police listened skeptically. "If that's a case against Sven Slosson, then we got a bum district attorney. We got no right to do it, but we'll take you on to his farm. If he raises a row, and you want to go to the D.A., and he wants to make something of it, okay. Otherwise, when he says, 'Get off,' we get off. And his rep is he will say it before we ask. Well, come on, we'll give it a try."

"Sven Slosson is my name," the slender, smooth-shaven man said angrily. "Yeah, I know about my brother. So what? Arnie Slosson was a mean man. A lot of people wanted to kill him. One of that lot did. He left me insurance, huh? How much? Ten dollars, or something?" His eyes were mocking in a grease-streaked face.

When he was told it was more than ten thousand, he whistled. "That'll pay me for having to stay away from home," he said. "I was scared of Arnie, after I married. The girl didn't like our beards. She was going to marry Arnie if he took his off. Well, Arnie

was too tough for me. Always nasty and mean.

"So—the girl had a nice farm, a little money, could cook good. I took my beard off and married her! Heh heh! So I was scared to ever go near Arnie again. Now he is dead and I get that place too, eh? No-o, I won't go back. Even so, I won't go back. I like it here too much, see?"

They were standing by the barn. Bud Lake, his face still flushed with excitement over his first airplane ride, was looking at Ollie with some respect. Not as a detective, but as the man who had got him that ride.

He cocked his head to one side as if studying Ollie to see what he could do in return. His button-bright eyes lighted suddenly, and he walked away from the group a few paces, then went on more slowly, studying the ground.

Slosson was talking to a Boston policeman, patiently repeating his alibi, when Bud came back to Ollie, his eyes disillusioned and accusing.

"All this stuff is the bunk, huh? Just like the junk about men have different treads, different ways of walking? Heck, Sven, here, walks just like Arnie did. Exactly! I mean, sometimes. Other times, he walks shorter. See, there by the milk-shed, the boot-steps? But now look at this—where he's just been walking. Twenty-nine to thirty inches, see?"

Ollie stood very still, staring at the ground, his shoulders dejected. After a minute, he said, "I'd like to use your telephone, Mr. Slosson? Okay?"

"Don't have one," the man said gruffly.

"Yeah?" Ollie exclaimed. "What's that wire if it isn't a telephone? Out of order, you mean? Say, I bet it is working again. Mind if I try? Or *do* you a mind my going into your house, for some reason?"

"Of course not," Slosson snarled. He indicated his smudged face with a finger. "I'm busy, see? I'll get everything messed

up, and— Oh, come on! But make it quick!"

The others followed to the door, and waited there, Bud Lake coming in with Ollie. The detective searched his pockets for something, lifted his automatic out and laid it on the table, and then found what he wanted. A notebook. He thumbed through it, his eyes carefully watching the pages.

He started to turn the crank of the party-line instrument, then held it. "Gee," he murmured, "I don't exactly remember how this deal works. What do I do—Arnie?"

The grease-stained farmer turned impatiently. "Ring, then lift and talk."

"Oh, thanks—Arnie! Thanks for everything, *Arnie!* You slipped on that one, didn't you? *Arnie Slosson!* It's Sven who is dead back there and—"

The farmer had gasped, his eyes bulging, a hand going to his throat. And then he made a leap for Ollie's gun, his voice raging with oaths and curses.

"Help, out there!" Ollie yelled, as he grappled with the man. "He's trying to kill me with my own gun!"

Then Arnie Slosson was free with a tremendous surge, and was aiming at Ollie, was pulling the trigger convulsively—but without results. A gun roared and the man screamed, clutching at his shoulder and dropping the gun.

"Aw," Ollie reproved, "you harness bulls are always too fast with the gun. My gun, that I let him pick up, has a full clip. But there's nothing in the chamber. That's one of our safety-precautions. Here's the case—this is Arnie Slosson. The dead man is Sven. Arnie waited all these years, knowing that Sven was the weaker of the two, that he would come back some day.

"Arnie got even, and he was getting paid his own insurance money, in the bargain. But he tripped on one small detail. A detail I knew, but that Buddy Lake, here, picked up. He walks with a fairly long tread, and Sven walked with a short tread. The trouble was,

we took it for granted the corpse was Arnie, see? It doesn't pay to take anything for granted."

Elder put in the call for the patrol wagon and a doctor. "No great shucks," he said. "A killer's arm is running blood. We just want to be sure he lives to get back to Vermont." He turned to Ollie. "And stop calling me a harness bull. That was me fired that shot! Now, I still don't understand all this!"

"Arnie took out the insurance and paid it, waiting until Sven would weaken and come to him, as he knew he would. After all, he knew Sven, didn't he? I wondered, first, about Arnie, who wouldn't buy anything in our town, buying those shells from Kitch Hardin. Why would he buy just the shells? Well, we know now that that made it certain the shots came from Arnie's own gun.

"Well, Sven came back. Arnie went to work with his plan, the only weak spot being if Sven would have let anyone else know he was back in town. But he was the kind who wouldn't, see? So, Arnie killed him, rigged up the corpse in his own clothes, got things set for a fire to burn Sven badly, and then started off in his disguise: the Van Dyke beard.

"He shaved the mustache, I figure, trimmed the beard, and put all that hair under Sven's face, to burn. Then he went to the airport and bought his way on. At Boston, he shaved the beard off in the washroom, but greased his chin so the rawness wouldn't show. I knew when I saw

how neat the house was, and how sloppy Arnie was. That, plus the length of the tread.

"But Arnie had to crack. There was no way I could prove he wasn't Sven. Oh! That reminds me! We got to get a plumber to open the drain at the airport on those wash-basins to match Arnie's hair there with the beard he will grow back in jail! We got to get that!"

Sheriff Elder groaned. "A plumber, now, at two dollars an hour!"

Ollie grinned. "And we need to search this place for prints, too, Sheriff. You see, Arnie planted Sven's to make us think they were his own! So we've got to get Sven's now, and prove them different from Arnie's. The Canadian passport should do it. The passport he had to get to enter Canada. Then the moulages, the blood-type, the cross-section of the hair—we got it all."

The Boston policeman blinked. "Oho! It's F.B.I. you are!"

"Heck, no!" Sheriff Elder grunted. "He's my county-detective! Come along, now."

Bud, faith back in his young eyes, said, "Hey, Ollie, I was kidding about Kitch. Sis ain't sweet on him. Look, will you bring your stuff about fingerprints, so I can start learning it now? Easy, like? When you come to see Marty to-night?"

"Step by step, you'll learn it," Ollie grinned. "Just like we got this killer. Step by step."